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ABSTRACT

A common theme in the current spate of reports advocating reform of American schools has been the need for attaining the twin goals of "equity" and "excellence." Yet there is widespread disagreement, not only on the relationship of quality and equality, but on the acceptable meanings of these terms as well. James Coleman, (1969) in "The Concept of Equality of Educational Opportunity" (1969), for instance, identified five different types of equality and inequality. Similarly, excellence has been defined in terms ranging from "high academic standards in traditional school subjects" to "the quality of one's performance rather than the kind of work." A major concern is whether excellence is to be defined in terms of the same goals and objectives for all students or whether individual differences are to be recognized. Differentiated curricula, grouping, streaming, and tracking have long been used to provide for individual differences. But most current reports have criticized these practices (especially tracking) as being inequitable. Other questions emerging from the complexity of this issue include dealing with students who will not be able to meet the newly proposed high standards; deciding whether vocational education has a place in our curricula; and determining the viability of bilingual education. In summary, equity and excellence are unlikely to be achieved unless the hard issues which these concepts raise for policy makers and practitioners alike are confronted. (KH)

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EQUITY AND EXCELLENCE: CONFRONTING THE DILEMMAS

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One of the common themes found in the current spate of reports advocating reform of schools, especially secondary schools, in the United States, has been the need for attaining the twin goals of equity and excellence. In its best-selling report, A Nation at Risk: The Imperative of Educational Reform, the National Commission on Excellence in Education asserted:

> We do not believe that a public commitment to excellence and educational reform must be made at the expense of a strong public commitment to the equitable treatment of our diverse population. The twin goals of equity and high-quality schooling have profound and practical meaning for our economy and our society, and we cannot permit one to yield to the other either in principle or practice.[1]

In his Paideia Proposal: An Educational Manifesto, Mortimer Adler argued that the revolutionary message in John Dewey's 1916 publication Democracy and Education "was that a democratic society must provide equal educational opportunity not only by giving to all its children the same quantity of

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public education--the same number of years in school--but also by making sure to give all of them, all with no exceptions, the same quality of education."[2] Adler argues:

> But the democratic promise of equal educational opportunity, half fulfilled, is worse than a promise broken. It is an ideal betrayed. Equality of educational opportunity is not, in fact, provided if it means no more than taking all the children into the public schools for the same number of hours, days, and years. If once there they are divided into the sheep and the goats, into those destined for economic and political leadership and for a quality of life to which all should have access, then the democratic purpose has been undermined by an inadequate system of public schooling.[3]

In High School: A Report on Secondary Education in America, Ernest Boyer observed:

> Pushed by the historic United States Supreme Court decision in Brown vs. Board of Education (1954), public education was called upon to serve more equitably the historically bypassed students-- the poor, the underprivileged, and the underachieving. Congress and the courts moved, belatedly to counter years of scandalous discrimination. Racial balance and compensatory education became urgent new priorities.[4] Schools became the battleground for social justice.

Boyer noted that in 1980, 61 percent of black youth and 56 percent of Hispanic nineteen-year-olds held high school diplomas compared with 78 percent of white youth the same age. "Opportunity remains unequal. And this failure to educate every young person to his or her full potential threatens the nation's social and economic health," Boyer asserts.[5] Commenting on the link between the push for excellence and economic recovery and higher employment, Boyer agrees that the national interest must be served but asks: "Where is the recognition that education is to enrich the living

individuals? Where is the love of learning and where is the commitment to achieve equality and opportunity for all?"[6]

From John Goodlad's study titled A Place Called School: Prospects for the Future, a number of recurring themes emerged, including one of equity. Goodlad sees the distribution of resources for learning, especially time, as creating inequities in opportunity to learn. He views some issues of equity as having "little to do with the race or socioeconomic status of students. Others frequently do relate to socioeconomic status and race-- particularly issues of differences in content and teaching practices encountered by students depending on their enrollment in high-, middle-, or low-track classes."[7] Goodlad argues:

> The case for educational opportunity has revolved almost exclusively around the question of access to a school to be commonly attended and around discrimination based on color, race, or creed, but other considerations are now likely to expand the dimensions of controversy. Increasingly, the issue will be whether students, as a consequence of the schools they happen to attend and the classes to which they are assigned, have equality of access to nowledge.[8]

In his examination of vocational education practices in the schools he studied, Goodlad was left with some nagging questions:

> Is the division of secondary schools into students emphasizing vocational studies and others pursuing primarily academic programs a self-fulfilling prophecy reflecting a popular myth about learning that begins its relentless course in the primary grades? Is the ultimate fulfillment of this prophecy a further division of people into two classes of workers? Finally, is there equity among socio-

> economic classes and whites, blacks, and Mexican-Americans in regard to the circumstances and the outcomes of the process?[9]

In proposing its plan of action in Educating Americans for the 21st Century, the National Science Board Commission on Precollege Education in Mathematics, Science and Technology, the Commission repeatedly stresses that its focus is on all students, not just the affluent or the gifted. Recognizing "that substantial portions of our population still suffer from the consequences of racial, social and economic discrimination, compounded by watered standards, 'social promotion,' poor guidance and token efforts," the Commission urged that the "Nation should reaffirm its commitment to full opportunity and full achievement by all."[10] In the Commission's view,

> equality of educational opportunity is absolutely essential to the nation's commitment to excellence. It is crucial that programs for minority and economically disadvantaged students and for students whose parents do not speak English at home continue to strive for the same level of excellence as other programs...."Excellence and elitism are not synonymous. Too often we equate the notions of affirmative action, nontraditional student, or continuous education with mediocrity. We must open our doors to create educational opportunities for a wide variety of students, and we must recognize the potential for excellence in a diverse student body. Equality and quality are not mutually exclusive."[11]

The Education Commission of the States Task Force on Education for Economic Growth, as did the National Commission on Excellence in Education, sees the improvement of education in America as crucial to national survival. The report points out that:

> Over the past generation in America, we have mounted a

> massive social and educational effort to deliver on that commitment. We have broadened access to education and improved the educational performance of large numbers of our citizens who for many years were put at a disadvantage by poverty, minority status or both. The civil rights reforms and social legislation of the sixties--notably the Elementary and Secondary Education Act--signalled a far-reaching commitment by our nation to put old wrongs right and to educate those who once were barred from access to quality education....Our twin goals, which we must pursue simultaneously and with equal zeal, must be ever broader access to education for all students--and access to quality as well.[12]

Clearly, there is consensus among the reports, all of which describe the current situation as a "crisis" in American Education--most vividly expressed in the title of the National Commission on Excellence in Education's report, A Nation at Risk; all of which call for raising the standards and enhancing the excellence of education; and all of which speak of the twin goals of equity and excellence, of equality and quality.

A couple of decades ago, the shibboleth of the day was "equality of educational opportunity" just as today's watchword is "excellence." Nor was the concern for equality and quality found only in the United States. Israeli education went through several phases as it approached its "disadvantaged" or tenuei tepeuach groups while trying to achieve high standards for its system as a whole. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) states as a group and many of its member nations individually undertook projects and studies aimed at providing equal educational opportunity and opening up access to educational opportunities for populations not ade-

quately served. Australia and New Zealand undertook programs of compensatory education to provide greater equality of educational opportunity for various populations. There is a massive body of literature from countries around the world concerning the issues, the problems, the programs, the research or efforts to provide equality of educational opportunity and quality education for all. Yet, there is no real consensus on what exactly constitutes equity, just as there are differences in the meaning of quality and excellence.

In the United States, the debate was joined with the publication of James Coleman's report titled, Equality of Education Opportunity[13]. Section 402 of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 directed the U.S. Commissioner of Education to "conduct a survey and make a report to the President and the Congress... concerning the lack of availability of equal educational opportunities for individuals by reason of race, color, religion, or national origin in public institutions at all levels...." As pointed out in the introduction to a Harvard Symposium on the report, "The language of the section hints that the legislators were looking for documentation of what they felt to be obvious: that is, that minority groups had poorer schools and poorer teachers, were generally segregated by race, and reflected these disadvantages in poor achievement."[14] However, Coleman and his colleagues, observed that the concept of "equality of educational opportunity" has had a varied past, "has changed radically in

recent years, and is likely to undergo further change in the future."[15]

In an internal memorandum that determined the design of the Coleman study, five different concepts of equality and inequality were considered:

-- One type of inequality may be defined in terms of differences of the community's input to the school, such as per-pupil expenditure, school plants, libraries, quality of teachers, and other similar quantities.

-- A second type of inequality may be defined in terms of the racial composition of the school, following the Supreme Court's decision that segregated schooling is inherently unequal.

-- A third type of inequaltiy would include various intangible characteristics of the school....such things as teacher morale, teachers' expectations of students level of interest of the student body in learning, or others.

-- A fourth type of inequality may be defined in terms of consequences of the school for individuals with equal backgrounds and abilities. In this definition, equality of educational opportunity is equality of results, given the same individual input.

-- A fifth type of inequality may be defined in terms of consequences of the school for individuals of unequal backgrounds and abilities. In this definition, equality of educational opportunity is equality of results given <u>different</u> individual input.[16]

Three of the concepts focus on equality of school input resources; the last two focus on the effects of schooling or student achievement. In Coleman's view, what occurred in the 1960s was a

> change in the concept of equality of educational opportunity from school resource inputs to effects of schooling. When that change occurred... the school's responsibility shifted from increasing and distributing equally <u>its</u> "quality" to increasing the quality of its <u>students'</u>

> achievement. This is a notable shift, and one which should have strong consequence for the practice of education in future years.[17]

Thus, the first dilemma we confront is that of determining which concept(s) of equity should guide educational policy and practice? Equality of school resource inputs? Equality of school outputs or student achievement? Equal quality education? How is educational quality to be defined and by whom?

Equal quality education, in turn, depends on the accepted concept of excellence. And here, as with equity, there are varying concepts prevalent. The National Commission on Excellence in Education defined excellence broadly to mean several related things:

> At the level of the individual learner, it means performing on the boundary of individual ability in ways that test and push back personal limits, in school and in the workplace. Excellence characterizes a school or college that sets high expectations and goals for all learners, then tries in every way possible to help students reach them. Excellence characterizes a society that has adopted these policies, for it will then be prepared through the education and skill of its people to respond to the challenges of a rapidly changing world.[18]

Having expressed a very broad concept of excellence--"performing on the boundary of individual ability in ways that test and push back personal limits"-- the Commission then operationalizes its definition in terms of high academic standards in traditional high school subjects. Like many other statements, excellence is equated with higher academic standards, tougher requirements for graduation and college admission,

elimination of "soft" subjects from the curriculum, limiting options for students and generally working harder in the traditional school subjects.

In his classic statement, Excellence: Can We Be Excellent and Equal, John Gardner wrote:

> An excellent plumber is infinitely more admirable than an incompetent philosopher. The society which scorns excellence in plumbing because plumbing is a humble activity and tolerate shoddiness in phlosophy because it is an exalted activity will have neither good plumbing nor good philosophy. Neither its pipes nor its theories will hold water.[19]

Gardner argued that it is the quality of performance rather than the kind of work one does that is of significance in determining excellence and that society required high level performance in many fields. Does the concept of excellence in schools and colleges also call for high level performance in a variety of fields or only in specific subjects? Are all subjects of "equal quality?" Are all students to achieve at an equally high standard or are the "personal limits" of which the National Commission on Excellence in Education so diverse that quality must be differentially defined? Is the concept of differentiated education antithetical to high standards and excellence?

Contrasting the Report of the Committee of Ten (1893) with the Report of the Commission on Reorganization of Secondary Education, The Cardinal Principles of Secondary Education (1918), Lawrence Cremin observed:

> Formerly, when the content and purposes of secondary education had been fairly well defined, equal opportunity meant the right of all who might profit from secondary education as so defined to enjoy its benefits. Now, the "given" of the equation was no longer the school with its content and purposes but the children with their background and needs. Equal opportunity now simply meant the right of all who came to be offered something of value, and it was the school's obligation to offer it. The magnitude of this shift cannot be overestimated; it was truly Copernican in character.[20]

Which approach to equal opportunity should guide educational planning? This issue has been raised again in most of the reform reports of the 1980s in terms of a common core curriculum for all. The Paideia Proposal is quite clear: Adler advocates the same goals and objectives for all students, without exception. And, he advocates the same course of study for all from kindergarten through grade 12, without exception:

> To give the same quality of schooling to all requires a program of study that is both liberal and general, and that is, in several, crucial, overarching respects, one and the same for every child. All sidetracks, specialized courses, or elective choices must be eliminated. Allowing them will always lead a certain number of students to voluntarily downgrade their own education.[21]

The issue raised is one which has been with us a long time and is basically an ideological schism between those who believe that there is a common culture to be transmitted to all through a common curriculum and those who believe in individualized, differentiated curricula focused on the needs of the students. Finn notes that most of the current committee "efforts to improve educational quality are universalistic, scholiocentric and cognitive. They unabashedly assume that everyone can and should learn the same things, at least up to a point, and that that point

should be the same for everyone in a school, a community, or an entire state."[22]

In this connection, differentiated curricula, grouping, streaming and tracking have long been used to provide for individual differences in ability, achievement, aptitude, motivation, and interest. While there are many variations, grouping is usually aimed at reducing variability along particular dimensions presumably to facilitate learning and teaching. While research on ability grouping and tracking has been conducted for at least the past 75 years, the findings continue to be equivocal. For equity reasons, most current reports are highly critical of tracking practices.

Goodlad, for example, concludes from his studies for A Place Called School, that tracking practices preclude equal access to knowledge, especially for the poor and minority children who are relegated to inferior tracks. Goodlad asserts that tracking practices create the myth that there are basically two kinds of people: those who are "head oriented" and those who are "hand oriented." In secondary schools, the latter are found in the non-academic, vocational or general tracks. His general conclusion is that the 38 schools he studied

> received children differentially ready for learning, educated them differentially and graduated them differentially prepared for further education, employment, and, presumably, vocational and social mobility. The 17,163 in our sample had quite different opportunities to gain access to knowledge during their years of schooling. At least some of these differences in opportunity to learn, it appears, were differentially associated with economic status and racial identification.[23]

Goodlad recommends "a common core of studies from which students cannot escape through electives, even though the proposed electives purport to be in the same domain of knowledge," elimination of grouping students in separate classes on the basis of past performance, random assignment of students to heterogeneous classes-- all aimed at "offering the most equity with respect to gaining access to knowledge while still preserving the more advantageous content and teaching practices of the upper tracks" through improved pedagogy, not differentiated, inequitable tracks and curricula.[24]

Fenstermacher has argued that:

> The consequences of accomodating individual differences by curricular variations are enormous. Using individual differences in aptitude, ability, or interest as the basis for curricular variation denies students equal access to knowledge and understanding available to humankind. Students grouped as slow learners and later tracked into vocational programs are effectively barred from the literature, history, fine arts, and science-- and the training in intellectual skills accompanying these disciplines--believed most likely to free their minds from convention, dogma, and cliche. Students grouped as fast, highly motivated learners and later tracked into college preparatory programs usually are prevented from developing the practical skills and traits of character typically associated with good work at a trade or craft. No theory of education known to us permits such selective access to knowledge and ideas based upon individual differences in aptitude, ability, or interest. Of course, it is possible that some students may not benefit equally from unrestricted access to knowledge, but this fact does not entitle us to control access in ways that effectively prohibit all students from encountering what Dewey called "the funded capital of civilization."[25]

Fenstermacher's argument is that we need to be much more clear about "the knowledge and understanding, the skills and

traits that mark a person as well-educated" and that we need to create curriculua which provide a sound general education for all in precollegiate schooling. The dilemmas raised are ones with which educators have been grappling since universal education became a reality: What constitutes a general education and the common curriculum for all and how must this be differentiated to take into account individual differences which make a difference? Does it mean exposing all students to the same content? If so, to what point? Does it mean common standards or only minimum standards beyond which individuals are free to go and grow? In what ways do we differentiate instructionally and provide for diversification--or is differentiation to be avoided? Do we differentiate curriculum content, process, both, or neither? At what point(s) do we differentiate? Is what Torsten Husen calls "the inevitable selection for elite education" really inevitable and what are the curricular implications for such selection? Does equality of educational opportunity mean only equal access to knowledge and does that imply identical educational experiences? Is the purpose of precollegiate education only that of providing a general education or is there a place and a need for vocational education? If education is to provide for both general and specialized education, what constitutes an appropriate balance? These are equity and excellence questions which focus on the instructional program and processes and impact

on issues of educational inputs and outcomes.

As "standards are raised" in the drive toward achieving excellence-- and, in the case of the United States, the "tide of mediocrity is reversed"--serious questions are raised about the impact on low-achievers and so-called "marginal students." Quite understandably, the call for higher standards, greater number of required academic courses, and more stringent requirements have raised questions about the possible effects on the dropout problem. What will happen to students who cannot or will not meet these more rigorous standards and requirements? There are those who argue that to question whether all students can attain these new standards is anti-intellectual and anti-democratic-- it is only a matter of setting high expectations for such expectations to be achieved. They argue that rather than frustrate students, higher standards provide an incentive and motivation for higher achievement. Doyle, for example, asserts that

> Low standards are the educational equivalent of Gresham's law. Just as bad money drives out good, poor education saps academic strength. The easier it is to earn a high school diploma, the less it matters. It is a degree without distinction and, signifying little, it is not worth the effort, particularly for students with no postsecondary plans. Perhaps paradoxically, standards encourage student performance and act as a stimulus to teachers and the extended school community. No more should be asked of standards; no less should be expected.[26]

Those who have been involved in compensatory education and dropout prevention programs question this assertion and,

with good reason. After all, their efforts have not always been effective and they might have done better by forgetting all about various intervention strategies and programs and simply announced higher academic standards and expectations. Nevertheless, increased academic requirements raises serious questions of equity and excellence, equity in terms of equal access and opportunity, and excellence in terms of restricting the notion to academic excellence.

Current reform reports are very critical of vocational education and would either eliminate such programs entirely or limit them drastically. Adler declares flatly that there is no place for specialized or particularized job training in the common school and that the common course of study, with its liberal-general and nonspecialized characteristics "is truly vocational in the sense that it aims to prepare children for the three vocations or callings common to all."[27] Boyer cites a study which found that "job prospects for graduates of vocational programs are not much better, overall, than they are for students in the nonspecialized curriculum."[28] Moreover, Boyer observes, vocational students are often shortchanged academically: "Job training is being acquired at the high cost of quality education. And options for the future are restricted."[29] Several reformers view vocational education as creating a second-class citizenry, asserting that all students need career education but not job-specific training at this level,

and that poor and minority students are overrepresented in vocational education classes. Depressed by what he called "the anachronistic nature of much vocational training," Goodlad argued instead for students to be involved in a common academic curriculum which would provide them with equal access to knowledge plus "the development of a mature perspective on careers, career choice, and bases for career decision making."[30] On the other hand, there are educators who, while accepting the need for improving vocational education, view the reform proposals as dangerous and inequitous, pointing out that it is the vocational experience which keeps large numbers of students in school and provides them with meaningful academic experiences-- there is excellence in performance in the vocational sector, equal although different from excellence in academics. To deprive or limit opportunities for such education is inequitous, they argue.

There are many other questions that relate to equity and excellence. One reform task force, for example, sees literacy in the English language as the single most important educational objective and would eliminate all programs in bilingual education. (It would not discourage students studying a foreign language but does not approve of bilingual education.) For the past two decades, considerable attention has been paid, not only in the United States but in other nations as well, to cultural pluralism. The impetus for such

programs has been directly related to the issue of equity. By focusing on academic requirements will those elements of cultural pluralism in the curriculum and in teaching be restricted or limited and would this be inequitous? In an effort to raise standards, many states have instituted regular minimal competency testing at points in the school. In Florida, the failure rate of black students was more than triple the failure rate of white students. Assuming test-fairness, is minimal competency testing an inequitous practice?

As the National Commission on Excellence in Education declared: "The twin goals of equity and high-quality schooling have profound and practical meaning for our economy and our society, and we cannot permit one to yield to the other either in principle or practice." Everyone--or almost everyone--would concur with that statement. The problem is that in striving for attainment of the twin goals of equity and excellence, there are many dilemmas which must be confronted and resolved. We are all for equity and excellence but we are unlikely to achieve these ends unless we go beyond the slogan and deal with the hard issues which these concepts raise for policy makers and practitioners alike.

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